

## **Interview for “Their Stories: Lowell’s Youth and the Refugee Experience”**

Date: February 12, 2014

Place: International Institute in Lowell, MA

Interviewees: Rafal Thaher (from Iraq)  
Clarice (from Congo)

Interviewers: Nina Petropoulos (student at UMass Lowell)  
Somaya Rajai (student at UMass Lowell)  
Susan Thomson (Visiting Lecturer at UMass Lowell, Sociology Dept.)

Nina: I'm Nina. I live on a farm. I'm a Sophomore at UMass Lowell. I like to play music. I have never had Chinese food because I have a peanut allergy. I love tacos, that's kind of it. I've been outside of the country once to go to Belize, and that was it.

Somaya: I'm Somaya, and I was born in Afghanistan, but I was raised in Iran and Iraq. I lived in Baghdad before, and I traveled a lot of European countries, but I've never been to South America. My major is psychology, and I graduated from Bio last semester. So I'm a psych major and a sociology minor and came to the U.S. 8 years ago I think. It goes fast that you don't even realize, so I don't know, eight or more than that, but it's around that.

Rafal: My name is Rafal. I'm from Iraq. I've been here three, four years. I came the end of 2009. Before that I was in Syria. I left Iraq in 2005. I went to Syria. I stayed in Syria for four years and a half, and then I came here as a refugee from Syria to here. I like music. I like photography. I like fashion, all that. I want to be a doctor in the future.

Clarice: My name's Clarice. I was born in Congo, in West Africa. I moved from Congo to Uganda when I was 10. I spent five years in Uganda, and then now I'm here. I like track and field as a sport, and I like math as a favorite subject and I want to be a nurse.

Nina: Nurse?

Clarice: Yeah.

Nina: It's hard stuff. It's a good job, both of you in the medical field. That's tough stuff, keep it up.

Rafal: And Business too.

Nina: Business? Those are two good ideas to keep going. What do you do for an event for track and field?

Clarice: I run 200.

Nina: You must be fast.

Clarice: Not really.

Nina: That's all right. You've got some time to practice.

Susan: Somaya had mentioned it might be good if we can concentrate individually on one person first and then go to the next person. Maybe we'll start with Rafal and then go to Clarice.

Rafal: You want me to start again?

Susan: No, just to talk more about, you can follow the questions, but what it was like coming to the U.S.

Somaya: She asked the first question

Rafal: In the beginning, it was really hard for me because I didn't speak English at all, zero English. When you'd ask me anything, I was like, what are you saying, what? I won't understand, and my father used to help me to translate each word for me. Now it's been four years. I learned a lot in high school, and I can go and I find a job. I work, and then I learned from life in here. In the beginning, it was difficult, but not it's much easier.

Somaya: What was your first impression the minute that you got here? You know those things that you see in the airport? I don't know if you had that feeling, you guys had it or not. What was your first impression the first minute that you got off the airport and you were trying to exit out? Were you happy? Were you excited?

Rafal: Kind of nervous, because we don't know where we are going, the house. We don't know where are we coming to and the city, the people and all that. So the first thing we did, I was with my mom and my brother, we were all close to each other walking all together. We don't want to lose each other because we don't know the language. We don't know the address yet. We know the address, but we don't know how to get there. Is this far from the airport or something?

Susan: You were just given an address?

Rafal: We were just all together. They gave us an address and the apartment that we have to go to. Somebody in the airport after 15 minutes came to us, and he took us to our apartment, two actually, one lady and a guy. They came and took us from the airport, and they drop us in the apartment. They say, this is your home now, and just make sure to close the door, the windows, everything. That was our first day, so on that day we didn't really sleep, because we are coming from all the way, like two days. I think it's 14 hours. I don't remember, so 14 hours travel from Syria. We had transferred in Paris, from Paris to here, so for two hours sitting in the airport. That was really boring for us, just sitting doing nothing. We don't even speak French. Then we came here.

Susan: Who sponsored your trip here? How did that get arranged?

Rafal: We are refugee from Syria, so by the IOM. They took our case because we lost 24 people in Iraq during the war. My mom's family and my father received a death threat, so they sent him a death threat. They said if you don't leave the house in 24 hours, we are going to kill you, you and your family. My father, he just went to Syria. We didn't have our documentation, the passport, me and my mom and my brother, so we have to wait to receive it. We applied for the passport and our documentation to leave the country. My father, he left directly to Syria after one week.

During that time, we left our house. We went to my uncle's house, and my father left from my uncle's house to Syria. We stayed there for almost two months. I was really far away from my father. During that time, some people came into our house, and they just kidnapped my cousin, her son. They kidnapped him, and we couldn't stay. Then we moved to another house, to my different uncle house, and we stayed there. After that, both of us, we went to Syria when we received our documents, so we went two cars, by GMC car for 7, 8, 10 hours, like that, to go to Syria by the car. We went to Syria, and we were able to enter Syria with our document. We stayed there for four years.

First thing we did, my father was in the border of Syria, between Iraq and Syria, so he was waiting for us to get us. Then we went back to Syria to Damascus, and we went to our apartment there. After one year, my family applied to the immigration in Syria, and we were going to go to Liechtenstein. It's near Sweden, but we didn't accept it there, because Europe closed all the doors for the refugees in Europe. We're waiting, and then we stayed in Syria.

After the last year, in 2008, we applied to the United States. They said this is your last door, if you want to go or not. My mom, she brought the application, and my dad fill it. Then we sent it. We said they will not accept us, and this is the last chance. We just give it to them, and after two months they called us, and they said you are accepted. Come and get your tickets to come to the United

States. Before that, we did a lot of interviews with the United Nations, six or seven times. Every time you have to go tell the story, why, and the reason for the security and all that.

Somaya: You have to say the exact things that you said the last time, and they test you.

Rafal: The application and all that.

Susan: How old were you when you were going through all this?

Rafal: I was 13 or 14 years.

Susan: When you left you were maybe 10?

Rafal: Yeah, 10.

Susan: It must have been confusing.

Rafal: I left when I was 9 actually. I turned 10 in Syria, so it's almost 10 years.

Nina: How about you Clarice? How old were you when you went through the interviews?

Clarice: I think I was 10 too.

Nina: What was it like when you were a 10-year-old? Did you know what was going on, or was it just like, what?

Clarice: I didn't know nothing, because my step-mother used to do everything for us, because we didn't know how to answer those questions. If you have interview on Friday, from Monday this week you have to start doing a rehearsal what you are going to say, because [you don't even know what to say]. My mom has the list of the questions and what they ask kids. They're going to be asking you where's your mom, because my mom is a step-mother. My step-mother's name is the one in the document. If I [made confusion, I said my mom was such and I didn't say my step-mom's name, so everything is wrong.

Nina: So critical, you have to get everything right.

Clarice: They say my mom's Clarice. My real mom, they say, is Clarice, and my step-mother is [inaudible], so Gra-fa is my mom in the document. If they ask me, what's your mom's name and I say Clarice, they look at me [inaudible], so you have to do rehearsal every day until Friday. You put everything in your mind.

They're going to ask you, who's your mom? Your mom, they mean your step-mother. You have to say your step-mother's name.

Nina: That's a lot of stuff to keep track of at such a young age. How long did the interview process last for both of you until it was over, you can breathe, you don't have to memorize things anymore? Do you remember?

Clarice: It took us years and years

Rafal: I think it takes one hour, one to two hours.

Somaya: They test you, definitely. If you have any disease or anything, they test you

Clarice: They usually focus on young kids. My sister, she was five, so they have to concentrate on that kid. Everything she said has to be true. If she missed anything,

Nina: I can't even imagine.

Clarice: It was really bad.

Rafal: It's a long process too.

Nina: When you finally got to the U.S. after this process, all this strenuous time, could you breathe easy, or was it just a new stress that's swapping out a different one, the overwhelming not knowing the language, all these things?

Rafal: That was the first thing. The culture here is different, so in the beginning it was really hard.

Somaya: Don't talk about it. I'm not there yet.

Susan: Not to [inaudible], but maybe it does make sense. We can ask a question, and then you could answer, and then you could answer. That might work better actually, given that we're all sitting here. Maybe if you'd like to now tell a little bit about how your family decided to come here and what you went through in terms of what the decision was like, what was going on in the Congo at the time.

Clarice: I noticed that in the part where we used to live, I don't know how to say, it's like a district, when they say District of Colombia, that district. Part of that district, I don't know how to say it. This is the United States. There's only one in Massachusetts. In Massachusetts, they're focused in Lowell. In Lowell, they're focused on some part of Lowell only. You know what I mean?

Nina: Really small?

Clarice: Yeah, and that small part is where we used to live, that part in Lowell. When people sleeping, they have to go in every house and kill or do something bad to those people, or take everything, all the documents, everything. We used to live there, and they announced it on the radio, that something's going to happen in this area. They say a specific time, get ready, because you know something is going to happen. Then my mom and my dad said that you're not going to sleep today. We have to go. It was about 12 p.m. We all go. We leave everything in the house. We just go like that, because we have to cross the border when nobody's there. On the border they have security over there who guards, so nobody crosses the border.

Around 12 we went and crossed the border from Congo to Rwanda and then from Rwanda to Uganda.

Nina: Nonstop all the way through?

Clarice: Yeah, but we had a car. We were driving. I don't know where we slept. We just go somewhere and sleep over there, and then in the morning we took a bus to Uganda. It took us all day, driving to Uganda. Then we stopped from Uganda. I don't know how to say it. I don't know how to call it.

Nina: I wouldn't either.

Clarice: We had nobody over there. We slept there. Everything was there. We have nothing to use, nothing. [Inaudible], so we have to go there and buy food from the restaurant [inaudible]. I don't know what happened. I don't know who told them about the refugees. I don't know how that happened. After a week, I think, we were sleeping outside, no shower, nothing. We were just there [inaudible]. Then my mom ... I don't know [if she found anybody, I don't know who]. Then she told her to go and stay in her house, so we went there and stayed there until we find our own house. Then a friend of my mom, I don't know how she [inaudible]. After that, it took us almost seven years to come here.

Susan: Did you come to Lowell directly? Was Lowell the first place you came in the United States?

Clarice: Yeah.

Susan: For you too Rafal?

Rafal: Yeah, the first place.

Susan: You flew into Logan in Boston?

Clarice: Yeah, but in Uganda we used to go to school, so they teach some English over there. When we came here, we have a little English, not real English, but it was like A, B, C, D, stuff like that. When we came here, we know how to read. We understand everything, but we couldn't talk, because [crosstalk]

Nina: Yeah, it's different. It is fast.

Clarice: The pronunciation and the accent, it was hard.

Nina: English is wacky.

Susan: How old were you too when you came here?

Clarice: I was 16.

Susan: Sixteen when you came to ...

Clarice: Yeah.

Somaya: I'm sorry.

Susan: No, go ahead.

Somaya: If you guys don't mind, how old are you guys now?

Clarice: I'm 19.

Rafal: 20.

Somaya: I know we all had difficulty with English, but what grade are you guys in right now?

Rafal: I'm now a senior.

Clarice: I'm a junior.

Somaya: Have you guys passed the MCAS?

Rafal: Yeah.

Clarice: I don't remember [crosstalk ]

Rafal: I took it, and I don't want to take it anymore.

Clarice: I took every MCAS once.

Nina: Every one once?

Clarice: Once, yeah. I passed everything.

Rafal: I'm going to Middlesex in Bedford probably for one year and then transfer to UMass Lowell or Wellesley University, one of those colleges.

Clarice: I can't even tell how I passed the MCAS [inaudible]. We didn't [inaudible] circling, because in Africa we don't do the circling stuff. I don't even know what I'm circling here [inaudible ]

Nina: Good for you guys. For the record, your English is both very superb.

Susan: Yes, very good, definitely.

Somaya: What do you guys miss the most from the time that you guys left?

Rafal: Culture, the food. The culture and the food the most.

Somaya: I was there June, July, August, September.

Rafal: In Iraq?

Somaya: Yeah.

Rafal: This year or last year?

Somaya: This year, four months ago. During Ramadan I was there. We would go eat like crazy. My aunt said so many times, no wonder you're so fat. We would go eat constantly every 10 minutes, new restaurant, new place. I understand what you're saying, the food the most.

Rafal: The food, especially the falafel.

Somaya: Actually I brought frozen falafel.

Rafal: We have the special bread for the falafel. I cannot find it here at Lowell, so no one can make it here in Lowell.

Somaya: There's one in Boston.



Rafal: They don't have the Iraqi brand, Salmun

Clarice: They might have it, but the taste is different.

Somaya: We didn't bring the bread, because I have a little sister. She loves falafel. Every night she had to have ice cream and falafel for some reason. She would not sleep without falafel. We brought frozen for her. We bought a big huge box. Tell me. I can bring you some next time.

Rafal: I missed it.

Nina: How about you, Clarice? What do you miss?

Clarice: I think I miss food and language, because now I'm dropping everything.

Nina: Do you not have the chance to speak much of it here besides with family and everything?

Clarice: Yeah. I used to speak French back in Congo, before I went to Uganda. Then when I went to Uganda, I had to drop French and start to learn [in Uganda .

Nina: A lot of changes in what you have to learn.

Clarice: When I came here, I drop Ugandan and tried to learn English too, so it's hard to remember. I read in it, understand French, but I can't speak it. That's the only problem I have. Nobody speaks it except for my mom and my dad. Everybody loses French.

Rafal: And I miss the weather over there.

Somaya: It's totally different. Do you believe that ? That's how I felt. The sky, I don't know, for some reason, looks totally different.

Rafal: Over there right?

Somaya: Yeah.

Rafal: Yeah. I don't know it's always warm there, especially when you have all your family around you. When you go up to the house, everyone will welcome you with (?) and all those deserts and all that. I don't know. I miss that feeling when all your family around you.

Clarice: And those chickens . . . around.

Susan: Chickens around?

Somaya: What do you guys love most from U.S.?

Rafal: I love the system. Everything is organized, let's say like the driving, the road, the system of school. I really love it. They have food. In my country, they don't serve food for the student, break lunch or breakfast, all that. Here, I really love it. It's cool that you don't have to worry about getting food in your home. You come and get it in the school, so it's cool. The teachers, if you don't do your homework, you tell the reason why you don't do your homework, and the next day you come and give it to the teacher. Back there, they will be like, no, why you didn't do your homework, you get zero. They don't even understand the reason why we didn't do it.

Clarice

: They speak too seriously.

Rafal: They're really difficult, more strict with it.

Clarice: [Crosstalk] call the names of the people who did the homework. If your name is not there [inaudible]

Somaya: The ruler is waiting for you

Rafal: Back there, we have schools only for girls and schools only for boys, so all girls go to one school, all boys go to one school. Both schools, they teach same subject and same stuff, and I don't know why we don't have it like your school .

Susan: What about in Congo? Were most of the schools either all for girls or all for boys?

Clarice: Most of them Catholic school is that, but there's mixed school and private school. I went to Catholic school, but it was just girls. After that, I changed to boys and girls school. It depends on you, on your mom. If your mom wants to take you on the girls school, you can go to girls school. If she wants you to go in the boys and girls school, you can go there.

Susan: What kinds of things did you like about the U.S. when you came here, or even now?

Clarice: What I like is that people are very cooperative. They talk to everything . They listen to you, everything. If you have a problem, you go and talk to any teacher

or kid or student or anyone, they'll help you. In Africa, you can't go to any teacher or any kid or something, not everybody can support your idea.

Somaya: Now the two culture are mixed. I don't know if you guys consider yourself as an American yet or not, but now that you have your country's culture and American culture mixed, do you think you're the same person, or do you think a lot of stuff changed for you?

Clarice: I think I'm the same. Nothing changed. What was the question again?

Somaya: I'm sorry. Did I confuse you? How do I ask this question?

Nina: Do you mean on one side or the other, still a little bit more, you're kind of in the middle? Just what you're bringing back from where you guys came from and coming to the U.S. where the cultures are so different. Do you still lean towards one way or the other in certain respects or you find the middle ground?

Somaya: To make it easier, do you feel like you are more Americanized, or are you still the same person from your own country? Do you have those respects and stuff that you should do or you shouldn't do? You know what I mean? You find a friend or you date someone or if you don't ...

Rafal: Yeah, I can answer your question. I'm still more Iraqi but to the American culture, so it's kind of I'm in the middle right now. I have one year to be American citizen, so I'm still more with the Iraqi culture, even though I have Iraqi community. I help with the Iraqis, so I'm always with the Iraqi culture right now, but I have more American friends. I am with them, so I'm not really closed and not more really opened, so I'm kind of in the middle. I'm mixing the Iraqi culture ...

Clarice: Yeah [crosstalk] me too.

Rafal: ... with the American culture, so it's in the middle.

Clarice: I think I'm in the middle too.

Nina: How about your parents or other members of your family? Do you think they would answer the question the same way?

Rafal: My mom is with the Iraqi culture and my dad's same, Iraqi culture.

Clarice: I think my mom would say, yes, she's in the middle. Because back in Africa, she used to have people to live with, friends and stuff like that. Here it's the same thing, has her friends.

Nina: Same thing?

Clarice: Yeah.

Somaya: I think for older people it's difficult to change. As a young generation, it's so easy for us to go from one road to another road. For older people, like my parents, my dad has been here before us. He is a person who responds or does to come here, but still, he has a saying. If you date an American or any guy, you are not going to come to my house. After, it doesn't matter. It's winter or summer, before sunset, you have to be home. No excuse, no excuse. My car broke down, I had friend over, no. You have to be home. That's how my dad is.

Rafal: My father, before he didn't let me work in any place far away from Lowell. My first job, I got it here in the international Institute with broken English. I used to help refugees even though it was my first year here, and I was helping refugees. I tried my best to help them with my broken English. My second job I was waitress in a restaurant. I learned more during that time when I started working in the restaurant. I got more communication with the American and different people around the world. They used to come from Paris. Some people, they tried to come, like Italy. A lot of different culture came into that restaurant and tried the Iraqi food. I was glad as I worked there. It was the first Iraqi restaurant in Massachusetts, and I was an Iraqi waitress, so it was really cool.

My second job, I got it last year at Dunkin Donut, so it was different for me. I'm going to work more with the American. It felt really cool to talk always with American. Something is different now with the American culture, not with the Iraqi. My father, one time, they asked me to work overnight, and I asked my father. It was during Black Friday, and the stores get really busy during that time. I was, dad, will you let me work? He was like, overnight? I was like, yeah. My brother, same day, he has to work overnight, so they were wondering who's going to bring me back home. He said, okay, you can work, so I worked overnight. Then I came back around 5:30. My brother came and picked me to go to my house, so it was like, whoa, because in my country, no one can work overnight. Night shifts, we don't have that. Girls, usually they don't work in stores or making coffees or all that, so I felt like, whoa. After eight months, I became an assistant manager, so I'm really proud of myself, make some difference a little bit.

Susan: It sounds like your parents are also comfortable with you doing this.

Rafal: Because of the safety, that's why they are okay. I am really respectful to my parents. I won't do something wrong or something, so I always endure their rule. If they something, I say okay. I'll be home by that time. I'll be like, okay.

Nina: How about you, Clarice? Is your family strict?

Clarice: No, they let you do what you're supposed to do as long as it's the right thing.

Susan: Do you have brothers or sisters with you?

Clarice: Yeah.

Susan: How many?

Clarice: I have four sisters.

Susan: They're all here in Lowell?

Clarice: Yeah, and four brothers.

Susan: Four brothers, wow.

Rafal: Big family.

Somaya: Do you work?

Clarice: Mm-mm (Negative).

Somaya: You're lucky.

Clarice: I want to have a job.

Susan: You might have already said, but how many siblings do you have?

Rafal: I have three brothers, two of them in Iraq. One of them is married, and he has two girls. One of them, he's not married. He's going, probably. I'm not sure. My older brother, he's here with me. He's 21, 22, and I am the youngest one and the only girl.

Susan: You mother's here too right?

Rafal: Yeah, my mom and my father are here too.

Susan: For you, is it your mom and your father?

Clarice: My step-mom and my dad.

Somaya: Next question.

Susan: We have the list here.

Somaya: I'm a really shy person. Now you guys been through a lot, four years, right?

Clarice: No, two years.

Somaya: Sorry. You guys said you guys came around [crosstalk] you guys left your country.

Clarice: No, I left Congo to Uganda, but Uganda to here I was 16.

Somaya: You guys are so similar now, because you guys left your country and went somewhere else, and you guys came here. If you had the option, would you stay where you came from? Would you leave your country, or are you guys good that you guys are in America?

Rafal: Good question. For me, if my country is really safe over there, like here, I will just go there. After, when I get my education done, my PhD degree or anything else, good degree from here, and then probably I'll go back. If it's not really safe over there, I will just stay here until the situation gets better over there.

Clarice: Yeah, me too. Something is happening every day, every time, every second where I used to live. I'd rather stay here and study, make sure everything is in the right place so I can go back.

Somaya: Don't give me a short answer. Give a long answer.

Susan: Do you keep closely in-touch with your family members that are back in Congo and Iraq?

Rafal: Yeah.

Clarice: Yeah.

Rafal: Every day I talk with my brother in Iraq. Before, when we came here, we didn't know how to call them, because we didn't have home phone or something. My father, he get one cell phone, and we have to ask for how to call international. We have to buy every day \$5, every single day to just call my brother with those cards. Now, because of the technology, we have the apps like you can download on your phone like Viber or WhatsApp, so you can call them for free.

Susan: There's so many ways to do it. That WhatsApp, I didn't even know about that till recently.

Rafal: I usually call him through Viber every day.

Somaya: Line is good.

Rafal: Line is too, and Talkray, something that you can talk if you want to talk with your brother and other brother, so you all come to one group. You talk, three of you, hey what are you doing? You can talk all at one time like we are sitting in one room, so this is kind of cool.

Clarice: [You just said everything . I don't know what to say. She already said everything.

Susan: So you do the same thing?

Clarice: Yeah, yeah.

Somaya: Have you guys traveled any other part of U.S.?

Rafal: Yes. The first few states was New Hampshire, Nashua. That was the first time that I went to there. Second thing I went to was New York. We went field trip to New York with the history class, so I was so glad to go to the Statue of Liberty. I was so happy, because it was my dream to see it, and after one year, I went there. When I was in Syria, when they said United States, I always think of the Statue of Liberty. I swear. When they say United States, America, that's America, the Statue of Liberty. I will go there. Then I just want to take picture over there, and then I went in. It was fun. That is the only two cities. I went to Connecticut to a farm in my history class also.

Susan: That was a history class at Lowell High School?

Rafal: At Lowell High School, yeah, with Ms. Wargestern, so we went there.

Clarice: I lived my first two years here in Burlington with my sister. Once she get married I just came back close. Each my sister get married, and I'm the only girl in the house. I can't stay with her anymore, so I just came back to Lowell. I went with her to New York City.

Susan: You were in the same class?

Clarice: Same class.

Rafal: No, we went actually two different classes. Mine was two years ago, my second year, my first year in Lowell High. Last year, 2013, we went to New York. We have marketing class in Lowell High School, with Ms. McNamara, so they give us \$25 for a business. For wholesale, we have to buy some stuff from there. We came back and sell it here and make a profit off what we did. We have to give the 25 back, and the profit goes to us. That's a trip we had to New York too. We

went to Times Square and went a lot of stores in New York to buy stuff from wholesale.

Susan: How did you like New York overall?

Rafal: I love it. I don't know. It's cool.

Clarice: Times Square. I still have that image in my head .

Rafal: The pictures, you remember?

Clarice: Yeah. And By chance I'm going to Washington D.C., which was my dream, my future [inaudible ] dream ever.

Rafal: I'm in the BPA, Business Professionals of America, it's a club in the high school. We have competitions, so we're going to stay in a Sheraton Hotel for three days after that. If we get accepted, we will go in March to Indianapolis for one week, and then we come back here. It's a competition, and we have to always be professional and all that.

Susan: It sounds like there were some really great classes at Lowell High.

Rafal: Yeah.

Clarice: Yeah.

Rafal: It's really amazing classes.

Somaya: Next time, if you want to make money, I can take you guys to New York. I know so many stores . I got lost so many times. I know so many stores. Next question. What are some of the culture traditions that you are proud of and you will definitely don't lose that? You want to keep that and pass it to the next generation, to your kids or teach it to your younger sister or brother.

Rafal: Our traditional clothes, I will always have it with me. My brother in Iraq, I always ask him to send me some Iraqi stuff from my country, because when you go to my house, always there is some Bu-hor the incense and the scarf and all that. We still have it, the old stuff from my country. I always want to keep it. The food, always, we are coking, Iraqi food every single day, my mom, always. Anyone welcome to my house, because my mom always cooking Iraqi food.

Somaya: We can go after this.

Rafal: That's all.



Clarice: There's a certain necklace that they wear in Africa. I don't know how it is called, but it's a necklace. Each necklace can buy a cow. It's like money but made of a necklace, so that necklace can buy a cow. I don't want to lose that. I would like to show my kids or other people how important that necklace is. Also to teach them, in my culture, if your grandfather sits in this chair, say this is my grandfather's chair, my kid can't sit in that chair. It's like a taboo you can't sit in that chair. I'll give that discipline to my kids, to anybody, to know how my culture act like. If my grandmother or my grandfather sit in this chair, every visitor who come in my house, they should just have the picture, oh, this chair is for somebody. Even if you don't tell them, they should just know, in this chair, somebody's sitting in this chair, because it's different from other chairs.

Rafal: How about if visitor came and sit on that chair? Would that be a problem?

Clarice: Yeah.

Rafal: Really?

Clarice: You tell them. I'm sorry, you can't sit here.

Susan: That's really a way of showing respect for your elders.

Clarice: Yeah. Other things in my culture, when it turns 12 AM, you can't sweep anything. You know how you are doing something and you finish you have to sweep [inaudible] you can't do that, because it's a taboo you can't. If it's midnight, we can't do nothing. If you need anything, if it's at midnight, you can't do anything. It's a taboo.

Nina: Everything ends right then?

Clarice: Yeah. You can go to bed and sleep or [inaudible]. Don't even wash anything. It's still like that.

Susan: Is it considered, if you do that, something bad would happen?

Clarice: I don't know, that's how they do that [inaudible] you can't sit on your daddy's chair, so it's like you can't sit, you can't sweep after midnight, whatever. You can't do this.

Somaya: Do you guys have any relative here other than your parents and brother or sister?

Clarice: No, I don't.

Rafal: Yeah, I have my cousin. He's a doctor with his wife, with his children in Tennessee. I have my mom's cousin . He's a doctor also in Worcester.

Susan: Do you ever get together with many other people in Lowell that are from Iraq or from the Congo?

Clarice: Yeah. The boy called [person's name], he was there. We live together, and we just known each other from Uganda. We became friends just like that. We go to the same school. We passed through the same situation together, everything together. They came one year, before us . We didn't even know what country we are going to in USA. Once they told us we are going to Massachusetts and [the person's name], the father, would be someone who will show you something. You're going to be in the same state, we were happy and surprised to see them [inaudible ], because in Africa we not too skinny. When they told us we have the image of how big they're going to be

Susan: Big, yeah.

Clarice: So we had the image, They're going to be so big. They're going to look so different. The English, they're going to be laughing at us, because we don't know English yet.

Somaya: You guys were young, so did you guys expect that America is going to be like this, what you are living right now, or different, the people would be different, the culture would be different?

Rafal: I don't know. When I was little, because I always used to see in the movies and all that, New York. I thought it was going to be more fun and all that. But in the beginning, always boring. There's no one in the streets, especially in Lowell. In the winter, you can't not find anyone on the street. When I was in Syria, in Damascus, even though it's winter and on a rainy day, you just go on the street. You will find a lot of people walking, drinking hot chocolate, eating croissant with chocolate or cheese and all that. It's always crowded. People love to live their life outside and walking or shopping in the street, going back and forth.

When I was in Syria, during the summer or winter, if we were bored, if we finished all our homework or all that, my friends called me and like, let's go to drink a hot chocolate or a juice. We just go in the street, and we just go back and forth and drink a hot chocolate or juice or ice cream. We have fun. When I came here, it was totally shocked. I was like, oh my God, why there is no one? I used to sit in the window, I swear. I used to sit and watch the window. Because the first apartment we used to live, it was on the highway. It's not a highway, a small highway. I was sitting and watching the people like that, no one is passing by. No

one is going back and forth. Across the street, it was for dogs, park. What do they call it? Like a garden. That's where you have to take your dogs and play.

Susan: Like a dog park?

Rafal: Yeah, dog park. A lot of people, they parked their car, and they just go play with their dogs. I was like, okay. Where is the people around here in Lowell? Lowell is like big city. It's not small. Downtown, they have a really beautiful downtown. During the summer, we have the Lowell Folk Festival, so I was like, oh my God, where they came from? Seriously, I felt like, whoa, this is a life right here.

Clarice: When I was in Africa, they would tell us about America. In my head, I used to picture it all looks like a paradise. It's oh my God, I can't wait to be in America. I don't know. It's somewhere surrounded with leaves, flowers, somewhere like that. Once I came here, I [inaudible] in Africa, the house made with wood in Africa, it shows like They don't have really enough money. That's how it seems for people here. They don't have enough money. That's how they have wood house. Once we came here, I'm like, what kind of house is this like we are refugees or something?

Rafal: The first day, when we arrived to the apartment, that said, this is your house. I was the first person who entered the apartment. I was walking, and then I felt like, oh my God, I'm going to fall down, because I'm walking on the wood. I'm going to fall down. The wood is giving a sound.

Susan: It feels [crosstalk]

Rafal: When you're walking it's like tack, tack, tack. We don't have houses from the wood. It's from concrete and cement.

Somaya: Myself, I was so scared the first day my dad came to pick us up. We came to the house, and my dad had to go to work. We could not sleep, because the house was from wood. We felt, not me myself, my brother and sister too, we felt like we were going to fall every minute.

Rafal: Every minute, seriously. When there is a wind or something, my mom, she always like, come here. We had a storm or something during last year, I think 2012. We had the biggest storm, the tornado.

Somaya: Sandy?

Rafal: Sandy.

Susan: Hurricane Sandy.

Rafal: My mom, she said, come out the house is going to fall down or fly or something. Stay near me, and be in the corner, all that. Okay mom, this is a strong house. It's not going to fly.

Clarice: Where I used to live, in Wellington, I was really surprised to see how you live with neighbors, but your kid can't go and play with that kid over there. I used to feel like I don't even fit in that area. Once I came to Lowell, it's way different than Wellington, because you all stay in your house . Even if you see kids in front of their door, you can't even touch him. What's going on? [inaudible ]. They can sue you. Why? You can't even talk to the neighbors. All you can do is, hi, hi, that's it. Because in Africa, we don't care if it's not your child, if it's not what, [inaudible ] you can even stay with your neighbor's kids even 24 hours without expecting even \$1.

Rafal: It's different.

Clarice: Here, every hour you touch that kid you have to pay money.

Rafal: One more thing I miss in my country is the neighbor. You don't have to have an appointment with your neighbor to visit them or to talk with them. I've been in this house two years. I don't even know my next door neighbor or the across the street neighbor. This is the American life, people working, so people are moving apartments or all that. I think it's different, but in my country, in Iraq, if you're living next door, you're always sending them food. They send you food. [Crosstalk ]. If you don't have bread on this day, you ask your neighbor. You have bread today? Yeah, they will give you bread.

Susan: Everybody shares.

Rafal: Shares, yeah. I swear to God, my mom and the neighbor, they used to know from the first house on the street to the end house on the street. It's more active people. You always know each other, and you know this family. You know the next door family.

Somaya: You would gossip a lot.

Rafal: They always talk and gossip. What are you going to do tomorrow for lunch? What are doing for dinner? All that.

Somaya: They even know each other's schedule.

Clarice: You don't have this system of volunteering stuff. There's nothing. You just do if you want. You don't have to get anything to do this. Here, your father can have a job and give the kids a job. If your father want to send you for two hours, he'll

have to pay me. In Africa, they don't do that. I'm your father. You can do it for me. [Inaudible ]. But when we came here. My neighbor, she told me to stay with the kid. She's going to give me money [inaudible ] because I didn't know that system that you have to pay money. You have to pay me money? For me, it sounds weird because we don't do that. I felt you are trying to show that you have money. That's how we feel in Africa. If you tell me, can you do this for me? I'm going to give you money. It's like you are showing, you think I don't have money? [Inaudible ]

Somaya: What are you trying to say, you're wealthy I'm not?

Clarice: It was weird.

Somaya: What is the funniest thing that happened here in the U.S.? Don't be shy.

Rafal: I don't know it's weird or normal here, but it was kind of funny for me. I was walking to school, and then I found two couples. They were kissing, and then we were like , oh my God. It's kind of weird. [Inaudible] this is kind of normal in here, so I was really shy.

Clarice: The funniest thing that I can say is that during summer. In Africa we don't have summer. We have nothing. We don't know cold and hot. It's always hot here. Once we came here, we found, women with a summer suit going everywhere.

Susan: With a swimsuit, just going out on the street?

Clarice: Yeah, in a swimsuit. I don't know we are afraid to see [inaudible] not wearing anything. My mom just went and covered [inaudible ]. Close your eyes. Don't see that. But now it's normal. You can even see anyone.

Susan: Even seeing people walking around with shorts on or things like that in the summer, did that seem strange too?

Clarice: Yeah. Because even my dad, he's 75 years old. You can't even see him without a vest. If he not wearing well, he has put vest up inside. Here you can see a father with two kids wearing shorts with nothing here. In Africa, it's really weird. When you see that, you have to cover your kids eyes.

Rafal: One more things [crosstalk ]. There's two things. One of the things, when I entered into the high school, I was crying. I said to my father, I don't want to go to school. I will just stay home. I will do everything. I will clean the house every day. I will cook. I will be housewife and all that. I don't want to go to school, because of the language, I don't have friends. I don't know anyone at the school. The first day, I was crying so much. Then they did my schedule and all that. I

went to my classes, and then everyone asking me, what's your name? I just say my name, and I shut my mouth, and I don't talk. When I start to go home, I was going around the building. I want to find the exit.

I ask one of the students, I showed him the paper. Excuse me, and he's like, can I help you? This class? I just show him. I don't even say this class. I just show him, here? He took me back to the last class that I was in. The teacher said, looked at me like, you were here right? I was like, yeah. You are the new student? Yeah. Then she's like, now time you go home. I was like, home? She's like, yeah, you go home. You don't stay. School is finished 2:30. I was like, oh, okay. Then I was going back and forth again in the building. I want to find the same door as I entered in the morning, thus I can go back to my home.

Finally, one of the guys, he took me like, this door you can leave. It's the exit door. I was like, oh okay. Then I left. I was walking in the Downtown on Merrimac Street, and I don't know where I'm going, because I've never been to Merrimac Street before. I was going always to the other street. I was walking and walking. I want to find the bridge. Then I find the green bridge . I was like, okay, I'm almost there. On my way back, there was one guy. He came and asked me. I don't know what he said. He was speaking Spanish, and then I was like, no English, no English, and then I left him. He was like, are you crazy or something? It was kind of different, the difficulties with the language and all that.

Clarice: You know how here you can go to school with no pencil and nothing? You can just [inaudible] and go. One day I went to school, the kid who was in junior year when I was in freshman, he's asking for the pencil. Are you asking for the pencil in your junior year ? Because in Africa, you start to carry your own things when you are in fourth grade. You have to be responsible. You have to bring your pencil, everything, sharpener. Everything's complete in your bag. Junior year in Africa , higher secondary,[inaudible] almost about to have a diploma. For that, you are a grown up. You can teach anybody in the country. When I came here, I still had the African system. I found the kid asking for the pencil. After that, I went home and started talking to my mom. Mom, do you know how a junior kid here can ask for a pencil? She was like, what, really? How can that happen? Everything I used to see in school, I used to come home and start telling my parent what happens in here. Now I'm doing the same things.

Susan: That's really interesting.

Somaya: Someone should go home and tell her about this interview.

Clarice: [Inaudible] used to tell me this, now you are doing it.

Somaya: Today we refreshed all the memories for you guys. What is your goals?

Rafal: My goal, to get good degree here and to get a really good job and hopefully go back or stay here. I don't know. My goal is just to be a doctor, to get some good education.

Clarice: My goal is to finish school, to have master's degree and go help those kids in Africa too, go help them just to help them, just like I was helped. I want to help other kids too, to reach their goals.

Rafal: One more thing I want to do is when I become rich, I will go back and build a school in Iraq and change the system over there and have some more good system of teaching. That's what I want to do.

Nina: Very admirable goals, both of you.

Nina: I have one question for you, just because it's winter time. What was it like the first time you saw snow, your first winter? Did you hate it, it's too cold? Did you like it?

Rafal: The first winter, I really love it, but now I don't, because you have to clean the car. You make sure the car is warm, and you have to clean in the front of your house and all that. First winter was fun. I swear it was really fun. We didn't have to clean and all that. The landlord, he used to come and clean it. He was like, you have to clean it. They were like, what? Now we have to clean it and make sure the snow away.

Somaya: She just reminded me of something funny. First year, when I came here, I was 10, 12, around that age. My dad, he had three jobs, and my mom, I don't know. I have a younger sister, so I think she was taking care of her or something. Me and my brother were so close, so we ran downstairs, and we were so happy. It was the first time that we saw snow. We went downstairs. He ran upstairs, and he got one huge bowl, and we throw so much snow in the bowl. Then we came upstairs, and then we add sugar to it, and we start eating it.

Susan: In Vermont, that's where they make maple syrup. Sometimes they put that on snow, and it makes a candy actually. That's actually something they do sometimes.

Clarice: They used to tell us it's going to snow, like oh my God, I can't wait to see the snow.

Rafal: Now we love snow, especially with the senior. I pray just to have the snow because we get day off, two days or one day, so we don't have to wake up. We just stay home.

Nina: Maybe tomorrow, hopefully.

Susan: Maybe tomorrow, yeah.

Clarice: Now I don't like snow anymore.

Nina: You don't like it anymore?

Rafal: Yeah, I don't.

Clarice: I used to like it. My first year, oh my God, every time I have to go outside and play with the snow. Now I hate it so bad.

Nina: Most people, even here. I've lived in Massachusetts my entire life. Most people I know, they like it when they're younger, it's fun. Then it's just annoying. You want it away.

Susan: I think that's good. I don't have any other.

Somaya: Do you guys have any question for me, her or her?

Rafal: Thank you so much.

Clarice: Yeah, I have a question. What are you going to use? Is this a project for you guys, for school something?

Nina: I think the professor can answer this question the best way.

Susan: Remember last fall when we did the mural? They're hoping to update a museum exhibit over at Lowell National Historical Park, and they want to have profiles of all of you included in the exhibit. We're doing these interviews, and then what they'll do is they'll pick out certain stories or phrases to probably put in a text. They might also ask you if you would go re-record some of the segments so that, for example, kids, when they come, they could push a button, and then they could hear you speaking about something. We're recording this now, and hopefully, they might even be able to take some things from this recording too for that. They were also saying they might want to do it again, so we have to give you more information about that later. It should be really exciting, because they get a lot of visitors, especially school children. Fourth-graders come to that exhibit. Have you ever been to the Lowell National Historical Park?



Rafal: The one right here?

Susan: Yeah, at the Mogan Center, right near Boarding House Park. There's an exhibit called Mill Girls and Immigrants. That's where this would be. We're trying to get all the parts of it together, and then there's going to be a group of museum designers that are going to meet and decide about the final plan. We would probably need to be in touch with you. I have your contact information, but maybe if you, Clarice, if you have a phone number or the best way to reach you.

Clarice: I only have email address.

Susan: What would be your phone?

Clarice: I don't have phone.

Susan: We can maybe just reach you here, or through Rafal maybe, if you see each other.

Rafal: Yeah.

Susan: Because what might happen also, they'll want to take your photograph.

Rafal: You have email, right?

Clarice: Yeah.

Rafal: She has email.

Clarice: I have email.

Susan: What is it?

Clarice: Do you mind if I write it?

Susan: Yeah, you can write it down. Also, Somaya and Nina are in my sociology of the family course at UMass Lowell, so they're going to be doing a research project this semester and using the material from the interview to write about what it's like to be a refugee family and some of the issues that you face. For that, Do you think people in your family might be interested to talk with them? Do you think that would be a possibility? They might have some more questions later?

Rafal: I can do that if you want.

Susan: Even just to follow-up. After this interview, once you start thinking about the issues, there might be other questions you might like to ask.

Somaya: We can talk after the whole thing here.

Susan: We can end this interview now. That's what I was thinking, because for their course project, they're going to write a paper about it. In Rafal's case, she was also going to talk a little bit about her own experience and your experience. If the two of you maybe could work together a bit, there might be a chance that you could meet again, perhaps, do you think Clarice?

Clarice: Yeah.

Susan: Because I think that once you look over what we did today, there might be other questions you meant to talk about and get more specifically into how it impacted your families, because for the museum exhibit, it's more about just you, in terms of what that was like. Let me go make a copy for each of you of this just so that you have it. This is great.

Nina: I'm just going to stop this thing here.



University of  
Massachusetts  
Lowell

RELEASE

I, (Print name) Clarice Rymond, hereby  
authorize the University of Massachusetts to record (or image) my likeness  
and/or voice and use my name and biography for educational, research,  
publication and promotional activities. I further authorize the University of  
Massachusetts to edit, to copy, to use and to re-use the recording (or  
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electronic and mechanical distribution in perpetuity.

I understand that I will receive no monetary compensation for the rights  
granted herein.

Accepted and agreed to: (Signed) Clarice Rymond

Date: 2/12/14

Witnessed by: (signed) Susan Thomson

Date: 2-12-14



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## RELEASE

I, (Print name) Rafal Thaler, hereby authorize the University of Massachusetts to record (or image) my likeness and/or voice and use my name and biography for educational, research, publication and promotional activities. I further authorize the University of Massachusetts to edit, to copy, to use and to re-use the recording (or image), in whole or in part for presentation, exhibition, publication, and electronic and mechanical distribution in perpetuity.

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Date: 2.12.14

Witnessed by: (signed)  Susan Thomson

Date: 2.12.14